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ABSTRACT

The second of two conferences on adult literacy focused on the broader contexts of adult literacy. That is, lack of basic skills is not a problem in a vaccum but is bound up with people's other problems and needs and the forces shaping their lives; likewise, efforts to teach basic skills must be viewed in relation to the local, state, and national institutions that are or need to be involved in those efforts. An ideal learning society would be learner oriented, pluralistic, interdependent, community oriented, accountable, and evolving. Problems with educational reform and adult literacy include lack of use of research findings; bureaucratic resistance; evaluations based on head counts, not service outcomes; negative messages to nonreaders; and public confusion. Recommended solutions include the use of a team-building approach, bypassing bureaucracies, the use of a public education campaign, bringing the business community into adult literacy programs, and strong national legislation for adult education. (The report includes an overview, a summary of the visions of what is needed that emerged from the conference, a list of problems, brief descriptions of some suggested solutions, a page of quotations from participants, and a list of the 24 conference participants.) (CML)

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A Gannett Foundation Conference Report

Literacy, Learning and the Future:

Visions, frustrations and possibilities in adult literacy

Results of a discussion by specialists
in adult literacy, adult education, social services and other fields
at Gannett Foundation headquarters
May 23, 1990

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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INTRODUCTION: WHY WE HELD THE CONFERENCE

This report condenses discussions at the second of two conferences on adult literacy held a week apart at the Gannett Foundation.

At the first conference, May 15, adult literacy specialists talked about current demand for adult basic learning, and about needs and problems in the effort to help adult non-readers. (The May 15 report, "Reaching Non-Readers," is available from the foundation.)

The second conference focused on adult literacy in broader contexts. That is, an adult's "lack of basic skills" is not a problem in a vacuum; it is bound up with the person's other problems and needs, the forces shaping his or her life. Likewise, efforts to teach basic skills must be viewed in relation to the local, state and national institutions that are or need to be involved in those efforts.

Accordingly, the foundation hosted 24 people representing organizations in adult literacy, social services, education, welfare reform and other fields involved in expanding and improving the system for teaching adults basic skills (see roster beginning on page 9).

"As one of the nation's leading funders of adult literacy programs, we look for ideas to help inform and inspire us in exploring the role that the foundation can play in promoting adult literacy and a climate of learning for all Americans," said Charles L. Overby, Gannett Foundation president and CEO.

Gannett Foundation Vice President Christy C. Bulkeley, whose program responsibilities include adult literacy, said, "We need to remember to ask the question, 'What is literacy for?'

"Many adults who need or want to learn basic literacy skills do so as a means to other ends. It might be to get a better job, raise healthy children, learn how to budget household income, or any combination of those and other goals.

"That's why we wanted to talk about adult literacy with a variety of specialists helping adults achieve those other goals and those working to change the system. We believe that this conference will help us all think more clearly about the future of the adult literacy movement: where it needs to go, what's hindering it, and which ideas might help it move faster."

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OVERVIEW

The participants agreed that the United States has a problem with education, that Americans are not learning well enough.

They articulated and generally agreed upon a vision of what is needed in education and learning.

They spoke of various things that "the system" -- schools, social services, communities, government -- needs to do to turn that vision into reality for adults needing help with basic learning.

They cited a number of obstructions preventing "the system" from doing those things.

The hard question was how to remove the obstructions and change the system:

"We're getting clearer about the imperatives of structure and goal, and not as clear about the imperatives of the mechanisms that will achieve the goal," Peter Gerber said.

As Sharon Darling expressed it, we're starting to see that public policy must change, on the one hand, and that individual adults and communities must be taken into account, on the other -- what's missing is how to connect the two with a "middle" of effective programs and services.

But the participants also set forth some specific possibilities for action that in one way or another may bring the vision of a healthy, learning society closer to reality.

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THE VISIONS: WHAT'S NEEDED

Based on remarks by many of the conference participants, an ideal learning society would be:

– **Learner-oriented.** It would base educational systems and services on the needs, goals and desires of the learners, focusing on individually developed and agreed-upon goals for learners.

– **Pluralistic.** It would take into account, and respond to, the needs and circumstances of everyone needing and wanting to learn -- schoolchildren, teen parents, minorities, adults seeking new skills, immigrants.

– **Interdependent.** It would offer a fully integrated system of literacy and basic-skills services for adults, perhaps provided in much the same way that a health-maintenance organization provides health services. Individuals could easily find the most appropriate sources of help.

– **Community-oriented.** It would provide easily accessible educational services where people live -- in their communities. The system for providing these services would be flexible enough to take community situations into account while still benefiting from state and national resources, direction and leadership.

– **Accountable.** It would be geared toward how well learners are learning in addition to how many learners are learning.

– **Evolving.** It would be receptive to what teachers and other staff learn through experience, as well as to what researchers learn through study, and would provide ongoing training for all staff.

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THE FRUSTRATIONS: WHAT'S WRONG

Participants generally shared what Roger Semerad referred to as "frustration with the slowness of the way things are happening" in education reform and adult literacy.

We know more than we're doing

Although literacy and education specialists have learned much about how people learn, and can demonstrate the effectiveness of various teaching methods, said Evelyn Ganzglass, little of this expertise has been introduced into schools and social services.

What has been introduced, in the form of special programs, tends to "disappear as soon as the discretionary funds have gone away, and you haven't changed the basic systems," Ganzglass said.

Built-in resistance

Forrest Chisman said that bureaucracies by nature tend to work against change.

"You can look at the learners and the communities and the programs ... and you can look at all these mega-policies on top that need to connect ... (but) the rock on which it all breaks is ... a rigidity of structure (in) most of the institutions that could reasonably be expected to accommodate the needs of learners," Chisman said.

Bureaucracies also tend to work against cooperation within themselves. "What we have now are fragmented wholes," said Maurice Weir.

Karl Haigler said, "We don't so much need visions as we need dynamite."

"A lot of forces ally themselves, either consciously or unconsciously, against change," Haigler said. "Sometimes the bureaucracies that see themselves as losers in this (prospective change) ally themselves with people in the field and with legislators, and they try to stop you."

Head count, not performance

Several speakers noted that public services in general tend to be funded on the basis of how many people are served, rather than on the outcome of the services. Agencies are not judged on their ability to help people become self-sufficient and thus independent of the social-service system. The result is a lack of accountability, a lack of consequences for agencies that fail to achieve significant results.

(Frustrations, continued)

Why non-readers don't sign up

One reason that many adults needing basic skills avoid literacy programs, Hanna Fingeret said, is an alienating, "social-engineering" approach on the part of too many program providers.

"People are tired of these messages that they're not good enough, and that they have to participate in these systems so they can get 'fixed' or they can get better, when they don't feel that they've participated in creating those definitions of who they want to be," Fingeret said.

Public confusion

Deborah Wadsworth reported on new focus-group research showing that the public neither understands nor sympathizes with calls for education reform or adult education. The public tends to blame the people who have not learned, rather than the systems and institutions that are part of the reason for their failure to learn. Such a lack of public understanding -- in contrast with public awareness -- makes it difficult to develop any mandate for change.

Wadsworth added that the press, for the most part, hasn't been very good at developing educational issues into consistent, informative coverage that keeps the public alert to what is at stake. Community "devastation" caused by educational failure may be covered intensely for a short period, she said, but long-term follow-up is lacking.

Meanwhile, Benita Somerfield noted, confusion has increased as many people, moved by public-service appeals in the media, have volunteered as literacy tutors -- only to be turned away by their local literacy programs because of a lack of resources to train them.

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THE POSSIBILITIES: TOWARD SOLUTIONS

Some promising actions that participants or their organizations have taken, are about to take, know of, or would recommend:

Team-building approach

As has occurred in Massachusetts and other states, bring the heads or representatives of different parts of communities and/or bureaucracies together in an "academy" -- a team-building meeting of minds across a range of disciplines. Help them agree on a common agenda by identifying common interests. Focus on which human needs are most important, and on principles of good service to meet those needs. Show how the various strands of public and private interest -- i.e., agency and institution leaders' concerns -- lead into the education reform/adult literacy issue. Create ways to work toward local solutions to problems through an alliance of systems instead of a fragmented approach. An "academy" can start as a retreat, but requires follow-up -- usually other gatherings, with assignments to carry out and goals to meet in between, and continuing communication thereafter.

Team-building can also take the form of coalitions, partnerships, and other collaborations based on participants' self-interest.

Triple bypass

Bypass governments, school districts and other bureaucracies by going "directly to the schoolhouse" (as the RJR Nabisco Foundation is doing) -- providing resources to enable imaginative educators to try new ideas to help people learn. Or explore the possibilities of supporting "middle-level entrepreneurs" who could provide effective services where systems can't.

Public outrage, public policy

Design a public-education campaign (as the Public Agenda Foundation is doing) against the widespread misunderstanding of the education-reform and adult literacy issues, to create public outrage that will turn into changes in public policy and practice.

Good cop, bad cop

Business as "good cop" -- local businesses working with community colleges to put workers through basic-skills training with the specific goal of improving product quality (Meridian, Miss.).

As "bad cop" -- local businesses threatening to leave town if local schools don't improve the basic skills of the students being graduated and looking for jobs (Tupelo, Miss.).

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(Possibilities, continued)

Bazooka attack

Destroy obstructionist systems "with a bazooka," legislating or court-ordering them out of existence. Change the terms of the debate by mandating that public money will go only to whichever agencies, public or private, can provide needed services effectively and at the best price. Or wait till systems collapse, then rebuild them from the ground up.

Federal legislation

If the pending federal literacy legislation passes, it will provide a new, strong, national framework for action on adult education. The legislation should clarify national policy, providing more money to help develop a diverse and flexible adult literacy system, including the first comprehensive national literacy center.

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QUOTES

"Let's start with what's going on in the communities. Who are the people who need literacy in relationship to what in their lives? ... What are they trying to change in their lives, and then what needs to be operating at the local level, at the state level, at the national level, to facilitate that, and what are the pieces that work in between to make that happen?" -- Sondra Stein

"We're not talking about just literacy ... we're not even just talking about education. We're really talking about human development, community development, development of a healthy global society ... (with learning) so integrated into our daily lives, into our work, into our family, into our political activities, our social activities, our community activities, that it becomes a way of living." -- Jacqueline Cook

"What we need to be looking at is a whole human-resource development strategy, with all those players who can put that together, the health and human-service people, the labor people, and everybody else ... working together." -- Benita Somerfield

"Until you get some of the lower-level and middle-level staff involved, the people that really have got to do the job, in conjunction with the people who receive the services, then ... you're going to continue to repeat ... mistakes." -- Burton Richardson

"School systems supported an Industrial Age pretty well. The question is, can they now change to support an Information Age?" -- Roger Semerad

The goal is "to develop a system of services that is transparent to the clients ... what they care about is improving their ability to do certain things ... literacy (must be) integrated into that." -- Karl Haigler

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GANNETT FOUNDATION

The Gannett Foundation, of Arlington, Va., is among the nation's leading nongovernment funders of adult literacy programs.

Since beginning its adult literacy funding in 1985, the Gannett Foundation has provided more than $6 million to a number of programs and initiatives. These include:

-- $2.66 million for the Literacy Challenge, a two-year, competitive program in cooperation with USA TODAY, to stimulate state-level coalition-building. Twenty states and Puerto Rico won grants to strengthen statewide coordination and cooperation among literacy programs.

-- $2.3 million to local adult literacy organizations in communities served by Gannett Co., Inc. media.

-- more than $1 million in support for a number of national organizations and programs, including: a national Adult Literacy and Technology network; The Literacy Network (formerly the Urban Literacy Development Fund); Literacy Volunteers of America; Laubach Literacy Action; the Assault on Illiteracy Program; the American Bar Association's forum on the Immigration Reform and Control Act; the Business Council for Effective Literacy.

The Gannett Foundation, with year-end 1989 assets of $650 million, is among the nation's largest private foundations. It spent about $30 million on grants, programs and operations in 1989.

In addition to adult literacy programs, the Gannett Foundation funds national programs to improve the teaching and practice of journalism, community projects, programs encouraging philanthropy and volunteerism, and scholarships.

Its two operating programs are the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University, the nation's first institute for the advanced study of mass communication and technological change, and the Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowships in Washington, D.C. The foundation was created in 1935 by Frank Gannett, founder of Gannett Co., Inc.

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